

# WHO WANTS TO BE AN AIRE-MAN?

BY TOM BENENSON

I recently spent an hour sitting attentively in front of my computer watching streamed video of an FAA safety seminar produced by the Fort Lauderdale FSDO. It was entertaining, absorbing, interesting and educational. Yep, you read correctly, it was an FAA safety seminar.

Faced with the problem of attracting pilots and maintenance technicians to their safety seminars, Cary Mendelsohn and Randy Williams, safety program managers with the FAA's southern region, tried to come up with a way to bolster attendance. Howard Hollis, a maintenance supervisor, mentioned that the FSDO had once hosted an annual inspection authorization called "FSDO Jeopardy," at which airmen tested their knowledge of aviation trivia against each other and won small donated prizes. The response of attendees was universally positive. Why not again try some kind of game show format?

The TV game show "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" was popular at the time, and the brainstorming sessions began to consider a format based on that TV show. Eventually, "Who Wants to Be an Aire-Man?" was ready for prime time. The choice of the use of "Aire" in the name was two-fold. First, it played off the title of the original TV show and, second, the organizers didn't want to give the impression that FAA Airman Certificates could be won in a contest.

The problem of finding a venue to house the "production" with the required seating capacity, public address system and large screen projection system was solved when the management of the Muvico Movie Theater co-located on the Boca Raton Airport, agreed to accommodate the seminar—complete with a buffet breakfast on Saturday mornings.

The program, with all the appropriate props, stage decorations and production values, has been provided by volunteers and sponsors. "The only thing the FAA has provided," Mendelsohn said, "has been a video projector, a vehicle and our salaries."

The seminar is conducted just like the television show, including the tension-building music. A "fastest finger round," in which four potential candidates are asked to answer a basic aeronautical trivia question, is used to decide who will occupy the "hot seat." The questions and multiple choice answers are presented on flat-screen monitors—donated by Gateway—in front of the contestant in the "hot seat" and Mendelsohn, who acts as the quiz master, as well as on a large screen for the audience.

As in the television show, the contestants

are allowed three "lifelines." They can poll the audience, ask a friend (which encourages pilots to bring a friend along to the seminar) or ask the computer to eliminate two of the wrong answers.

"Who Wants to Be an Aire-Man?" is arguably as successful as the TV show. There have now been some 10 "performances," and the number of pilots participating has increased dramatically. "Before we started we were getting approximately 30 to 40 people to our safety seminars," Mendelsohn said. "Now we're unhappy if we have only 200. The theater has 330 seats and I hate looking up into an empty balcony, so we're trying to fill the theater." Participants who arrive by airplane at Boca Raton Airport can walk to the theater or get a courtesy ride from Boca Aviation. "The location of the theater has been perfect," Mendelsohn said. "People can arrive by car, train or airplane."

Initially prizes were donated by local restaurants and other small businesses that recognized that aviation safety benefits everyone, but as the seminars caught on, aviation-related businesses also began to contribute. Prizes are given for the various point totals that contestants reach. Since the show went on the air, some \$50,000 worth of pledged prizes—including Learjet simulator

time; introductory glider flights; a lifetime enrollment in the FIRC (flight instructor renewal course) or ground school training for private, commercial or instrument ratings from American Flyers; a biennial flight review; and a ride for two on a Goodyear blimp—have been awarded to contestants who have ranged in age from a Boy Scout to an 83-year-old ground instructor. So far only one contestant has reached the 1,000,000-point mark, two have reached

the 500,000-point level and five have amassed 250,000 points.

Each of the seminars is digitally recorded by the Boca Raton Educational Television (BRET) station and broadcast several times a month to the local community. American Flyers ([www.americanflyers.net](http://www.americanflyers.net)) streams the shows on its website and provides a link from the Fort Lauderdale FSDO ([www.faa.gov/fsdo/fll](http://www.faa.gov/fsdo/fll)) website. VHS videotapes of the seminars are available from the FSDO.

Last November, the FSDO and Royal Caribbean teamed up to present "Who Wants to Be an Aire-Man?" on a three-day Bahamas cruise. More than 95 pilots made the cruise and worked on getting their safety attitudes shipshape. If that weren't enough incentive to attend, pilots who attend the seminar qualify for credit toward the Wings program, and any aviation maintenance technician who attends may receive an hour of credit toward the FAA Policy and Procedures requirement of the AMT Award program.

Although the Aire-Man seminars were initially held once a month, the work involved is making it necessary for the FSDO to reduce the frequency to either twice a year or quarterly. The next "performance" of "Who Wants to Be an Aire-Man?" will again be conducted on the Royal Caribbean cruise ship the *Majesty of the Sea*, shipping out on October 18, 2002. If you can't schedule a trip to Florida for the cruise, you can still "attend" the seminar online and, through an arrangement being developed by American Flyers, get credit for the one hour ground school portion of a Wings program increment.

As impressive as the program has been in attracting pilots to the FSDO's safety seminars, its real success is that runway incursions and aviation-related incidents and accidents per flight hour by local airmen are at an all-time low in the Fort Lauderdale area. □